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SUBJECT: PRESBYTERIANS CELEBRATE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY SINCE
RECOGNITION

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11. (SBU) Summary: On September 19, the Vietnam Presbyterian Church celebrated its first General Assembly since it received national recognition in 2007. Deputy Director of the National Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Nguyen Thanh Xuan welcomed the Consul General and other foreign officials to the simple but recently repaired Binh Chanh Presbyterian Church in Ho Chi Minh City, where he spoke candidly about both the progress and the challenges the CRA has faced in understanding and responding to the diverse community of Protestant groups in Vietnam. Visiting American Presbyterian leaders also reported successful visits to the Central and Northwest Highlands, with only one minor run-in with local authorities that was quickly cleared up with a phone call to the CRA in Hanoi. While acknowledging stiff competition for hearts and minds from other Protestant groups, the Presbyterians are optimistic they can continue to expand from 80 to 300 congregations over the next three years. End Summary.

CRA Admits With Growth Comes Challenges

12. (U) The Consul General joined in the celebration of the Presbyterian Church of Vietnam's first General Assembly on September 19, held eleven months after the denomination received national recognition in October 2007. The colorful ceremony included performances by ethnic multiple minority groups and was attended by GVN officials and foreign dignitaries. Nguyen Thanh Xuan, the Deputy Director of the National Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) welcomed guests to Binh Chanh Presbyterian Church and noted the significant contributions the Presbyterians have made to the local community. The church itself is simple structure with plain brick walls and a tin roof but was recently restored and remains in very good repair.

13. (SBU) Xuan was refreshingly candid in his discussion of the GVN's struggle to understand the diversity and complexity of the many Protestant denominations present in Vietnam today. Because Protestant denominations differ greatly in their traditions, practices and organizational structure, Xuan admitted they present quite a challenge to officials who are used to dealing with the more centralized Buddhist and Catholic religions. As a result, it has taken the GVN a long time to understand that "one size does not fit all" in terms of handling registration and recognition of Baptists, Mennonites, and other Protestant denominations. Xuan said the CRA has expanded their dialogue and understanding through the registration/recognition process for a number of Protestant groups since 2005, including Baptists, Mennonites, United World Mission, and the Vietnam Inter-Christian Fellowship.

14. (SBU) Xuan acknowledged the challenges of working in the Central and Northwest Highlands, where, like many other Protestant faiths, Presbyterianism has grown rapidly among ethnic minority groups. Xuan said while the 100 Presbyterian

congregations now registered in the Northwest represents "a humble number," it reflects the efforts authorities have made to "reconcile differences and maintain social order" in an area where "conflicts between the Protestant culture and the traditional culture" have been difficult to settle. During his time as a scholar of religion, Xuan said he observed how South Korean Protestants combined elements of traditional Korean culture into their faith, and expressed his hope that Protestants in Vietnam would create a similar blend of Vietnamese culture and Protestantism in the future. He ended with a quote from Ephesians 4:2-3 asking all followers to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Visiting Pastors Travel to NW and Central Highlands

15. (SBU) On October 1, Poloff met with three American Presbyterian leaders who visited Presbyterian congregations in the Central and Northwest Highlands in addition to attending the General Assembly. The delegation said they were warmly received by ethnic minority congregations in Lao Cai and Kontum, adding that they witnessed a great deal of "pent-up demand" for religion. During the trip, the group reported difficulties in only one Lao Cai commune where they said local authorities followed them by motorbike and attempted to halt their visit to a chapel near the Chinese border. Pastor Bao Xuan Nguyen said they called the CRA in Hanoi on the spot, and local police quickly backed down after receiving word from their superiors to allow the visit to continue.

16. (U) Vietnam Presbyterian Church leader Rev. Nguyen Ba Nha said that since 1975 the church has survived many "tests of faith" and looks forward to a time of peaceful development, but noted that competition among Protestant groups is drawing some Presbyterians to other denominations. Nevertheless, he has big plans for the future, and hopes to expand from approximately 80 congregations to 300 over the next three years. He and other

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Presbyterian leaders met with the HCMC People's Committee recently to request land to build a new headquarters here and hope to begin discussing the establishment of international churches in Vietnam's major cities in the near future.

17. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
FAIRFAX